

CHERNENKO'S NIGHTMARE

An Empire in Turmoil

From Cuba to Afghanistan, from Moscow to Vladivostok, little is going right for the Soviet Union under the weak and indecisive leadership in the Kremlin.

Nearly 67 years after the revolution that was to make Russia a paradise on earth and spread Communism throughout the world, the Soviet Union is in trouble at home and abroad, besieged and suspected by friend and foe alike.

On all sides, the frustrated clique of mainly old men in the Kremlin finds alienation, apathy and shattered dreams.

Many of the Kremlin's wounds are self-inflicted. Others are rooted in the Communist system. Some reflect deep-seated Russian prejudice toward any and all outsiders.

Most of the problems could be eased by imaginative, flexible leadership. Instead, under ineffectual Konstantin Chernenko, the Kremlin has turned in on itself. Its allies are confused. There is a clear-cut sense of drift at home. And a worldwide decline in Soviet prestige is accelerating.

Three major factors explain the sag in Soviet fortunes:

- The continuing Soviet leadership crisis. Since 1977, a power vacuum has paralyzed the Kremlin as an aging leadership, fearful of new ideas and loss of power, has fought a stubborn rear-guard action to defend its position.

- A shift in the East-West power balance. While the Soviet Union has stagnated, the U.S. has begun to recover from the traumas of the 1970s. A major arms program is rebuilding American strength, and Western unity has improved.

- The waning appeal of Communist ideology. Gone are

the days when Marxism excited the Russians and Moscow was the hub of world revolution. Gone, too, is any chance that the Soviet economic system will ever become a global model.

Nevertheless, though the Soviet Union is on the defensive, it is neither enfeebled militarily nor on the verge of collapse. Like a wounded lion, the Kremlin may be at its most dangerous as its many difficulties deepen.

From the magazine's bureaus abroad comes this assessment of where the Soviet Union stands today—

Eastern Europe: Straining at the Leash

Two sharply contrasting pressures are at work in Communist Eastern Europe—one exerted by the Soviet Union, the other by Moscow's increasingly restive satellites.

Faced with a rapid deterioration in its ties with the West, Moscow is tightening the screws on its client states to insure that all stay firmly in the Soviet camp.

In quick succession: New Soviet missiles have been forced on East Germany and Czechoslovakia. Pressure has been stepped up to integrate Eastern Europe into the Soviet economic system. Moscow ordered bloc nations to boycott the Los Angeles Olympics. Planned visits to West Germany by East German and Bulgarian leaders were called off.

Yet, taking advantage of Kremlin uncertainties, one East European regime after another has been doing all possible to loosen the bonds that lash them to Moscow.

To meet the challenge of recession, countries as diverse as Hungary and East Germany are revamping their economies in ways that threaten state control. Except for Czechoslovakia, each nation in the region is seeking closer economic ties with the West—at the Soviet Union's expense. Political contacts with Western Europe are widening. Everywhere, a sense of national independence is taking hold.

What makes these developments more worrisome for the Kremlin is this: Whatever counterstrategy Moscow devises, the carrot or the stick, Eastern Europe's yearning to free itself from the Soviet yoke seems bound to intensify.

Men born since World War II are on the verge of power in four of the region's six countries—present leaders in East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Bulgaria all are in

Soviets on the Defensive

Western Europe

Voters in Britain, France, Italy and West Germany ignore Soviet threats. NATO deploys nuclear missiles. Euro-Communists drift further from Kremlin.

Latin America

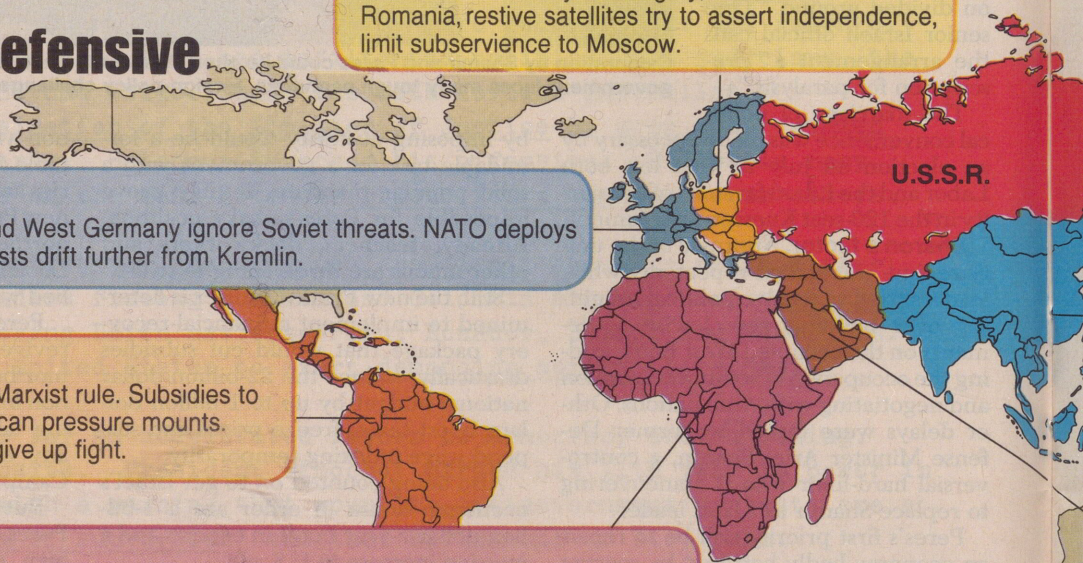
U.S. invasion of Grenada ends Marxist rule. Subsidies to Cuba, Nicaragua grow as American pressure mounts. Communist rebels in Colombia give up fight.

Africa

Setbacks in Angola, Mozambique, Congo, Guinea and Somalia dim Soviet appeal. Marxism wins few new friends. Only Ethiopia swings toward Moscow.

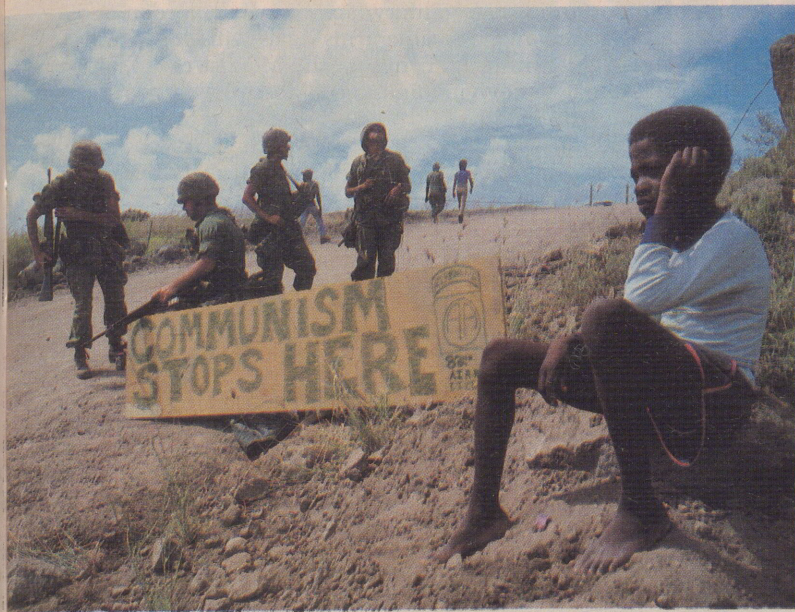
Eastern Europe

From East Germany to Hungary, Poland and Romania, restive satellites try to assert independence, limit subservience to Moscow.

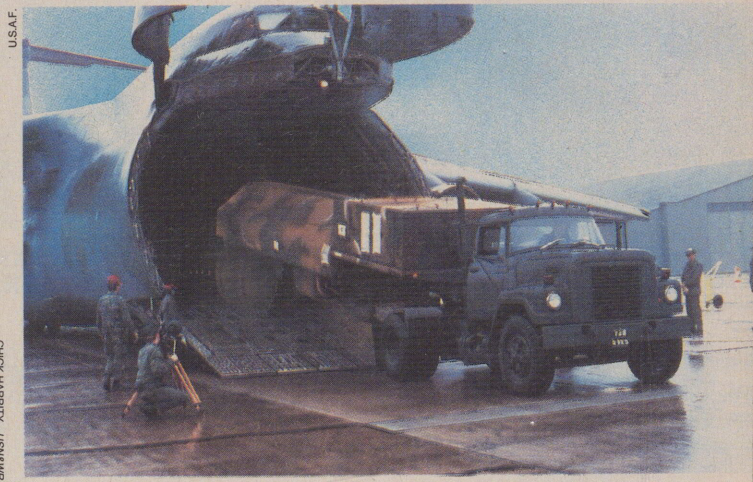


U.S.S.R.

Four Events That Keep The Kremlin Off Balance



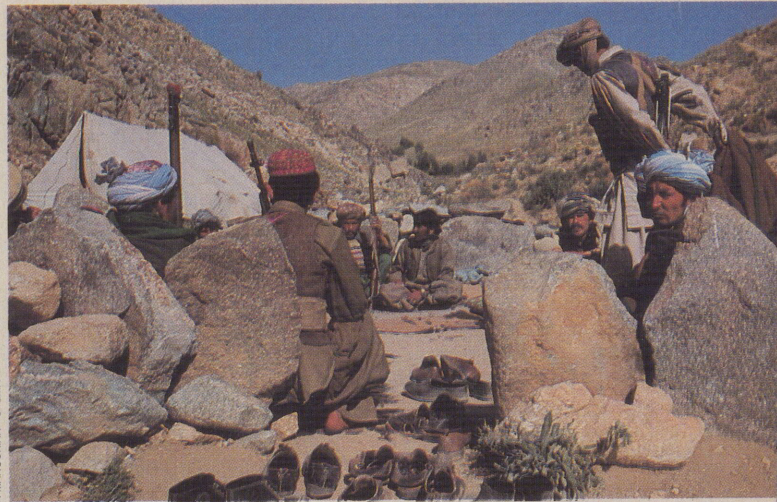
Grenada. American invasion curbs Communist advances in Caribbean.



Western Europe. New U.S. missiles boost allied strength.



Poland. National dissent weakens key member of the Soviet bloc.



Afghanistan. War with Moslem tribesmen ties down Soviets.



Soviet Union

Leadership problems add to inertia. Appeal of ideology fades. Economic stagnation worsens. Minorities chafe under Russian yoke.

Asia

War in Afghanistan drags on. Ties with China, Japan fray. KAL downing undermines Soviet image. Heavy aid to Vietnam increases drain on resources.

Middle East

Syria's Soviet-supplied Army fails in 1982 war with Israel. Pro-Soviet Palestinians are routed. Moves to wrest Mideast initiative from U.S. stall.

their 70s. The new generation feels no gratitude for Soviet liberation from Nazi Germany. It is nationalistic and impatient and unwilling to wait much longer for prosperity.

Curbing these attitudes by coercion almost certainly would prove counterproductive to Soviet interests. Today, the Kremlin needs its allies as never before—for trade, for technical expertise, for reassurance.

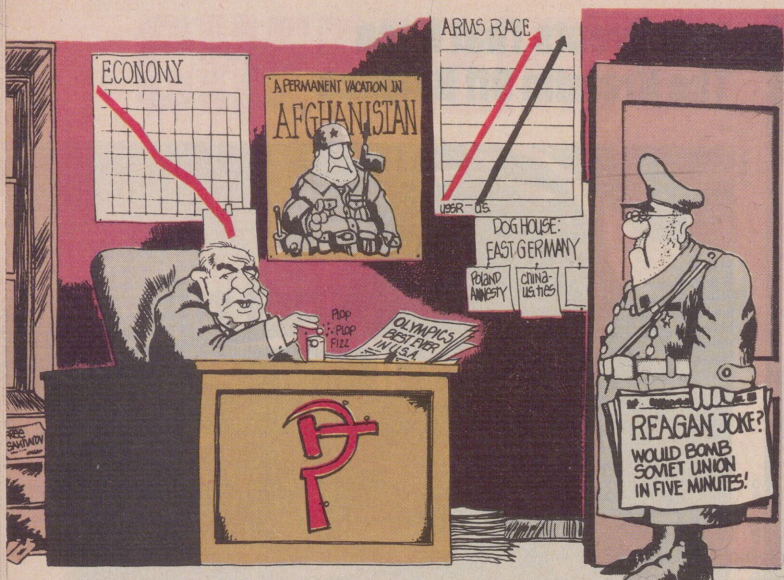
Decay in the Communist bloc is not terminal at the moment. Eastern Europe's Communist establishment still steps in line when ordered. But, for each gesture of compliance, there is one of defiance that increases the rot.

Handling this situation would test a Stalin, let alone a 72-year-old Chernenko. In the long run, innovative policies may be all that could head off an explosive outburst. But innovation is in short supply in Moscow today.

Western Europe: Soviet Pressures Backfire

Nowhere is the drop in Soviet fortunes more marked than in Western Europe, long the cockpit of superpower struggles.

Early in 1982, the Continent's peace movements were in full cry. A seemingly energetic Yuri Andropov had succeeded Leonid Brezhnev. The Reagan administration was viewed with alarm, even by European conservatives. Three key U.S.



"I hope it's good news. I could use some right about now."

allies faced crucial, unpredictable elections. Now, thanks in part to Soviet blunders, Moscow's influence in Western Europe is at its lowest point in years.

The peace movement has lost ground everywhere. President Reagan has shed much of his trigger-happy image by toning down anti-Soviet rhetoric. Governments in Britain, Italy and West Germany have consolidated their power and remain committed to deployment of new U.S. nuclear missiles. The Kremlin, not the White House, is being criticized for the breakdown in East-West arms talks. Adding to Soviet problems have been public-relations nightmares, such as the shooting down of a South Korean civilian airliner in 1983.

Beyond such specific developments, fundamental changes are in motion in Europe that act against Soviet interests.

High unemployment is producing a frightened generation of job seekers little interested in radical politics. Western Europe's Communist parties are watering down Marxist ideology. In France, often Europe's bellwether nation, an entire generation is rejecting Soviet pretensions.

An Italian Communist says: "Andropov held out promise that the Soviet system might become a model worth imitating. The rise of Chernenko wiped out that hope overnight."

This European change of heart is not complete. In Greece, anti-Americanism is at a peak. In the Netherlands, hostility to U.S. arms policies remains intense. In Spain, membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization still is in doubt. But, in general, Western Europe's mood is running strongly against the Soviet Union. Only a softer Kremlin line can check this trend. That is improbable while Chernenko and his hard-line supporters retain control.

The Middle East: Building on Quicksand

Capitalizing on U.S. mistakes, the Soviets have won new influence in the turbulent Arab world during the past two years. Yet those gains could quickly evaporate.

"The Russians are in better shape than they have been for a number of years," says Galia Golan, a Soviet expert at Israel's Hebrew University. "But they know how ephemeral relationships with the Arabs are. There is a degree of mutual contempt. Neither side trusts or likes the other."

Key to the Soviet comeback in the Mideast is Moscow's willingness to supply weapons to any country seeking them.

In Syria, the Kremlin's major Mideast ally, this policy not only has restored Syrian military strength after defeat in the 1982 war with Israel, but has opened the way for Soviet

use of important Syrian military facilities. Iraq, Jordan and Kuwait also have made sizable arms deals with the Kremlin. South Yemen remains firmly in the Marxist camp, and Egypt gradually is reviving links with Moscow.

Set against these Soviet advances are deep-rooted enmities that still separate the Moslem and Communist worlds.

"The Soviets don't necessarily gain what the Americans lose in the Mideast," explains Hebrew University's Amnon Sela. "The Russians' basic problem is that they are too close to the Mideast. That frightens the Arabs."

Arab suspicions appear as strong as ever. Communist parties throughout the Mideast are ruthlessly suppressed. Bilateral trade is discouraged. Few young Arabs study in the atheist Soviet Union. Even radical Libya avoids signing a friendship treaty with its sole supplier of arms.

Above all, the United States retains a pivotal role in any Arab-Israeli negotiations. In contrast, as long as the Soviet Union refuses to open ties with Israel, it is doomed to remain on the diplomatic sidelines in the Middle East.

After the U.S. retreat from Lebanon, the Mideast is one region where the Kremlin has cards to play. But to the Arabs, Moscow's hand is not strong, and its record is suspect.

Asia: Few Gains, Important Losses

Displaying a rigidity similar to its hard-line approach in Europe, the Soviet Union has nudged two of Asia's three giants perceptibly nearer the West during the past year.

In China, Kremlin snubs have undercut Deng Xiaoping's carefully crafted strategy of remaining equidistant from the superpowers. As a result, Peking now has moved closer to the United States.

In Japan, the Kremlin's crude bullying, including threats to target nuclear missiles on Tokyo, has backfired. In consequence, Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone has been able to ignore deep-seated pacifist sentiments at home to press ahead with plans to ally Japan more tightly with the U.S.

Both Tokyo and Peking remain open to negotiation with Moscow. But, apparently determined to give no ground, the Kremlin spurns such talks, adding credibility to American charges that Moscow is behind world tensions.

Also helping the U.S. is a widespread perception in Asia that the Reagan administration has brought new reliability and resolution to American policy.

Where Moscow has been making gains in Asia, the reason usually is similar to that in the Mideast—arms supplies.

In India, the Gandhi government, after flirting with the U.S. for three years, is swinging back to the Soviet camp in pursuit of a 5-billion-dollar weapons deal. In Vietnam, Soviet interests are sustained by aid worth 3 million dollars a day, much of it military goods, enabling Hanoi to keep an army of occupation in neighboring Kampuchea. In Malaysia, the lure of bargain helicopters has given the Kremlin a rare opening in that nonaligned Moslem state.

However, Moscow's goal of a secure, accepted Communist regime in Afghanistan is no nearer reality. At present, as many as 115,000 Soviet troops are tied down in a seemingly unwinnable war with rebel tribesmen at a yearly cost to the Kremlin of more than 6 billion dollars.

Distrust of the Soviets is pervasive in Asia, and the continuing slaughter in Afghanistan strengthens that suspicion. In 1983, a total of 147 Soviet spies were expelled by countries around the globe—three times more than in 1982. One quarter of them were thrown out by Asian nations.

Latin America: The Soviet Tide Recedes

No recent event shocked the Kremlin and its allies more than the 1983 U.S. invasion of Grenada. And nowhere has the impact of that incident been greater than in Latin America.

Cuba, the Soviet Union's closest Latin ally, is courting

Washington. So is Marxist Nicaragua. Argentina, Venezuela and Mexico are opposing further Marxist expansion in Central America. Suriname is restyling its leftist revolution.

The Kremlin also has altered course after watershed decisions that reflect the changing regional power balance.

To Nicaragua, Moscow's new message is blunt and dismaying: Massive Soviet economic and military aid is out of the question. To Cuba, the signal is equally sobering: The Soviet Union will not risk war with the United States over any Western Hemisphere country, even a Communist ally.

"Clearly, the Kremlin is on the defensive," says a well-informed Latin American analyst. "In effect, Latin America is off limits to Moscow."

This situation could last for years. Lacking resources or expertise, Moscow can offer little financial help in easing Latin America's debt crisis. Relations with the region's numerous military regimes are cool, and the Soviet Union is viewed with distrust by many of the area's democracies.

Africa: Picking Up the Pieces

In mid-September, after 10 years of pressure from Moscow, a Communist Party finally was created in pro-Soviet Ethiopia. For the Kremlin, it was a rare African success.

As elsewhere in the developing world, whatever political inroads the Soviets made in the last two decades have hinged heavily on arms deals. That shows no sign of changing. By American estimates, the U.S.S.R. is providing Africa with 11 times more military equipment than the U.S. and four times more than France.

With 25 of the world's 31 poorest countries, weapons are what Africa needs least. Instead, Africa's overriding priority is economic aid. On this score, the Soviets are miserly, to the annoyance of most African governments.

"I think the Russians have downgraded Africa to a considerable extent," says James Mayall of the London School of Economics. "They want to avoid any great commitments, and this reduces their bargaining position."

Also lessening Soviet influence, notably in southern Africa, is South Africa's bid for détente with Mozambique and Angola, both previously firm Russian allies.

"It's been a dismal year for the Soviets in Africa," notes Denis Austin of the University of Manchester. "South Africa is immensely powerful. The Soviets and their regional friends are having to recognize this."

The Kremlin makes little secret of its displeasure with this turn of events. But its inability to put forward a credible alternative strategy reflects the basic weakness of the Soviet position in southern Africa.

Most African specialists believe that Soviet impotence will continue. As Robert Legvold of the Council on Foreign Relations in the U.S. puts it: "The fact is that unless an African government determines that it is going to follow a military solution, the Soviets don't have much to offer."

Thus, adding up the pluses and minuses, this becomes evident: Years of indecisive leadership by aged and ailing men have weakened the Soviet Union's control over its Communist empire and tarnished its prestige worldwide. Also clear is that Moscow cannot recoup its fortunes without an abrupt change of direction and policy within the Kremlin, a change that is not yet in the cards. □

At All Levels, an Absence of Strong Leaders

MOSCOW

Outside pressures are not the only ones facing the Soviet Union. Years of lame-duck leadership also are sapping the country's economy and society at home.

Solutions to scores of woes, ranging from alcoholic factory workers to national agricultural setbacks, are being delayed or made more difficult by repeated struggles over political leadership in the Kremlin.

No one is predicting economic collapse or social chaos inside this powerful, closely controlled nation. The overall Soviet economy still is growing, and daily life for most people is improving, however slowly.

Still, many analysts contend that internal troubles have increased sharply since about 1977, when former President Leonid Brezhnev's health began to fail.

Experts here and abroad say that it now would take an exceptionally strong and able leader to reverse deterioration worsened by Yuri Andropov's short term in office and growing doubts that Konstantin Chernenko ever will get a firm grip on the Kremlin reins.

Not even the elevation to power of the Politburo's "young Turks," typified by Mikhail Gorbachev, a 53-year-old agricultural expert, would carry any guarantees of rapidly improving the situation.

A major reason for this is the very nature of the Communist system, as rigid as winter ice on the Soviet Union's northern rivers. Central planning and political controls discourage initiative and innovation among regional and local officials or at the farm and factory levels where directives are put into practice.

Lethargy reigns. "Under the Soviet system, the worst thing is to make a mistake," says an American specialist on the U.S.S.R. "So all kinds of people simply avoid doing or deciding anything to keep from being wrong."

This means that minor problems become major bottlenecks as they are bucked to ever higher levels for a decision—even to the 12-man Communist Party Politburo itself.

Officials of the Academy of Sciences worry that the Soviet Union will always lag behind the West because of delays in putting research to practical application. One solution would be to use more computers and microprocessors at universities—but the educational bureaucracy resists such controversial changes.

Social problems, including a high infant-mortality rate, declining male life expectancy and rampant alcoholism, are largely sidestepped. Brezhnev's attempt to curb drinking by raising prices triggered a wave of poisonous moonshine, so Andropov cut legal liquor costs and dropped the issue.

With the U.S.S.R. facing its sixth bad harvest in a row, agricultural improvement is as far away as ever. Brezhnev's "national food program" gave something to almost every vested interest involved, instead of ordering tough reforms that outside experts say are essential.

But there is no push for anything different down on the farm—or anyplace else in Soviet society. Without strong leadership, that will not change anytime soon.

By NICHOLAS DANILOFF



Chernenko. Ailing Soviet President.